

WACO TORNADO

May 11, 1953

(Photos by Mr. Duane Jones, City Engineer)

PHOTO LOG

. . . nado, May 11, 1953. Title: Photo Log, Slide No. 1.

"All right, this disaster was a tornado that the Indians had said for many years could not happen, and uh, in Waco, but the Indians got even with the white man on this. I imagine their reasoning for this was the amount of water that surrounds Waco, but the, this tornado was sighted coming in from the southwest, but no one could reach the weather bureau on account of the telephone lines were completely blocked. It came in and traversed the town from the southeast, I mean the southwest, corner to northeast corner. Going right through the heart of town, as we will see in the future slides here.

Slide No. 2

Here is the sign on the First National Bank Building showing the time of this tornado; it was twenty minutes til five. Wives were parked on the streets, waiting for their husbands to get off work, and we will see as we go along, where the damage came to these parked automobiles. And that was from parapet walls with great, tremendous cut limestone caps on them. We have pictures of cars that are not as high as the tires--even the tires were laid over. There was one man that did come out of one of those cars, he fell over it and it was bridged[?]; it was just one of those miracles that happen.

Slide No. 3

All right, now here's the path, Slide No. 3 is the path of the tornado through Waco. Travelling from the southwest to the northeast.

This bridge crossing the Brazos River was built about the same time as the Brooklyn Bridge and had never been moved. The clamps on the cable had

completely--were completely cemented to the cable, but those clamps were moved as much as a foot. They varied in distance moved from the bottom to the top of the cable.

Slide No. 4

Slide number 4 gives you a view of downtown Waco. This is the Album[?] Building, which was the tallest building in town, it's a very slim structure, could have very easily overturned. It would have very little overturn moment resistance from the narrow direction. Right across the street from there was the Dentist Building which was completely destroyed. That was originally a five-story building and they had gone in and split two floors, making it a seven story building. I looked in the basement of this building on a Monday night and it was completely full of water. On Wednesday, I went in the basement after they had pumped the water out and glasses were still sitting on the shelves, and all kinds of china was still sitting on the shelves. They didn't have water in them, most of them, though. (Minor: Heh-heh.) We looked into the basement and saw it, just completely brimming full of water. (Minor: Yeah.) They had an eight-inch line that was open and flowing in there and it took us almost all night to get it shut off. We had to come in here, and see, the street was completely blocked in here, and that valve was right down in here, and we had to go in there and clean it off to get to the valve.

Slide No. 5

This is a picture of the Dentist Building. This is what remained of a seven-story building. Now the construction of this building was with sand, brick and lime mortar, timber floor joists and ceiling joists. The walls

had no pile astors[?] at all; there was no lateral support on the walls. The timbers for the floor joists and ceiling joists were just merely stuck into the mortar--I mean into the brick walls... . load-bearing walls, I mean, and uh, the building came straight down except the walls came, went out in all directions. [Minor: Yeah.] That's one of the big arguments we've had, Joe, is, for a long time, but the meteorologists, you see, said it was wind velocity that did this, and well, the examples that I saw, I claimed it was a difference in atmospheric pressure. [Minor: Yeah.] We have testimony and I testified in federal court for four hours, but other testimony was given in that federal case that the single strength glass windows had more strength than the walls of that building. You want to turn it off a minute?

[This is Slide 6]

All right now, this is a, this was a, oh, a storage building here, there was a pool parlor back in here, it was up on the second floor, and there were some boys that were saved there that had jumped underneath the pool table. This valve I was talking about was located right in here. Now you can see what kind of difficulty I had. Well, that's all for this building, I imagine this is off the Dentist Building. See, what you get into in a kind of case like this, you cannot use heavy equipment, if you have chances of people being alive in there. So everything had to be moved by hand. We did have one body that was trapped between large timbers and with a leg and the arm were trapped, and the doctor that amputated the arm and leg to get the body out required that we have the family come down and identify the body. I was off working someplace else when they brought the family down there but the

women fainting on the street and screaming, I went to the Medical Association and asked them if that was--if that had to happen, according to their rules of ethics. They said no. I said, well we'll have a new doctor next time; I'm not going to have people [Minor: Yeah] uh, fainting and screaming in the street and having to view something like this.

[This is number 7]

This is a front--a look at the front side of the Dentist Building, see, we're working at night here. They did have a little bit of heavy equipment in here, just getting that off of the streets, but you got into the interior of the building, that's when you couldn't use even a Grado[?] a Grado was probably some of the best equipment because it would come in there and hug the timbers and get some rubble with it. [Minor: Yeah] But some people were rescued alive in this building--course the greatest number died in this building, there were a hundred and fourteen killed and fifty million dollars worth of damage and at that date that was much damage to the city of Waco.

[This is number 8]

This is Chris's Cafe which was just adjacent to the Dentist Building, and you see how it exploded-- [Minor: Uh.]

[This is number 9]

...identify the exact building here, but uh the reason for this one, you can see this car isn't badly damaged, not crushed like some we'll see later on, but ...

[Number 10]

All right, number 10 is a street scene. I believe that this is Washington, I'm not sure, but you can even see the cars that are buried here [Minor: Yeah]. Now these, they was, was uh, many cases where the women waiting for their husbands to get off work parked on the side of the street. One woman was parked and her children went ⁱⁿ to get birdseed for their parakeet and she sat there and saw both of them killed--crushed them. Now right there, that was on the street back of the Dentist Building.

[Number 11]

This was a--I can't identify it by name, the building--but this was more of a Warehouse type structure, but you can see the entire face of the building is lying out in the street, or on top of the trucks there. It has been just completely demolished by--it exploded. It went out in all directions.

[Number 12]

Number 12 is another street scene in the vicinity of the Dentist Building. Again, you can see the automobiles that have been crushed.

[This is number 13]

This is a little bit new brick building, but you can see what it did to the upper floor of that building...it just--it just blasted the face of it off. That's something here--you have a few of them broken here.

[Number 14]

This was an example that the Portland Cement Association would rather not talk about. This was a concrete stage at the fairgrounds--you can see the reinforcing steel--but this was an old stage from the fairgrounds that was closed in and made as a bath-house for a swimming pool right out here.

Right here is a--the ticket house-- ? sales. It was on skids. Two boys ran from this ticket office over into this bath-house of reinforced concrete; both of them were killed. Now that ? ticket office was not moved an inch. Wasn't touched. [Minor: Hmm.] But it completely destroyed that reinforced concrete bath-house. I think originally it was just columns that supported the stage [Minor: I see.], and then they came in and they probably blocked it in with concrete blocks or something like that, I don't know. I didn't go back there and inspect the material. But they had hunks of this concrete large enough thrown into this swimming pool that it knocked a good part of the bottom of it out. That swimming pool had to be, the bottom had to practically be re-built.

[Number 15]

This is that same stage where they were digging those boys out. One of the boys, I think that's probably his father standing there, he was a sergeant on the police force.

[Number 16]

Number 16 is an automobile that was parked on the street in front of one of the buildings, and you can see the condition of that automobile.

[Seventeen]

All right, seventeen is the area around the City Hall in Waco.. All these buildings were of about the 1880-1890 vintage. Many of them had basements in them but--and they just crushed right on through the floor to the basement. There was one black man down there that was trapped and they kept digging to get him out; he wasn't praying to the Lord, he was talking to the Lord. He said, "Lord, Lord," he said, "I'll never take another drink of beer," said, "if you let me out of here," he said, "I'll never go in a beer joint again." But he just kept that up the whole time. Bringing the bodies that were found over in this area and laying them on the City Hall lawn area and the blacks that were helping dig them out and bring them over there were doing just fine until somebody took a white sheet and covered one of those bodies and we lost all of our labor with that one move. [Minor: Ha!]

[This is number 18]

This is the Methodist Church, I believe it's the First Methodist Church, and this is the steeple, the tower right here that came off right here.

[Minor: Yeah] Now, there hasn't been as much damage in here, but your damage all fell right around here. And I imagine whatever the damage here was from this going on. [Minor: Yeah] There wasn't as much of structures--structure failure.

[Nineteen]

All right now this again, looking at the area around the City Hall, the square, to the southeast, you can see the military trucks in there--we had about 5000 troops in there to help. General Desusway(?) said he didn't want to put it under martial law; he and the Mayor agreed not to put it

under martial law so he brought about, General Desusway brought about 5000 troops in there. When he first came in I started having trouble between the civilians and the military and so I had to separate the--to accept on some equipment operators, which right at first, we didn't have very many equipment operators. But the military and the civilians just didn't work together in great unison.

[Twenty]

This is the--a fairly modern building; it was the Montgomery Ward building and it was owned by the Baptist Church. But again, you can see your windows was knocked out in here; and here your parapets, the row is completely gone. [Minor: And it hit that awning.] It hit the awning, this awning was, uh--course that was natural to go--it wasn't anything to keep this from going.

[Twenty-one]

All right--this is a little store that was between two buildings, and you can see where the roof was connected; but it completely destroyed that little store. That's all that's left of it right there.

[Twenty-two]

Twenty-two is another fairly modern building; I believe this is the Higgin building right here. This was a--again I think we can attribute this to lateral support--I just don't think they had it. Now most of the--there wasn't an awful lot of thought given to pilasters in a lot of this older construction.

[Twenty-three]

(?) just in front of some of the old buildings that I believe they're along (deleted) street. You can see that the front of

the building has been completely demolished.

[Twenty-four]

Another building that the awning or the canopy has been completely destroyed by the second floor of the building coming down on the canopy, plus the parapet wall.

[Twenty-five]

Twenty-five is a railroad station. Again, this wasn't too old a structure, but it was destroyed.

[Twenty-six]

Twenty-six are views of buildings along--I believe Franklin Street--and you can see that the major destruction has been in the upper second floor of these old buildings. I would not allow any gas to be turned on in any of these buildings, they were destroyed the upper floor and the Mayor backed me up on it because the City Engineer had to give permission for the gas to be turned on once it was turned off, so we turned off the whole town and we never did have a fire in cleaning up for this tornado.

[Twenty-seven]

Another picture of the fronts of the buildings, the way they were just completely destroyed, now ...

[Twenty-eight]

Now here's a shack, just a wrinkled tin shack. It's weathered just a little bit, but how something like that stayed there is a little hard to understand.

[Twenty-nine]

All right now this is the Roosevelt Hotel, and just look at the number of windows that were destroyed, knocked out in that building.

[Number thirty]

All right this again, are old buildings, but now this Armour and Company sign's on a fairly modern building--at least you have a clay brick and probably cement mortar.

[Thirty-one]

Thirty-one was a, oh I think it was a workshop. You can see the building stood up all right. [Minor: Yeah] I mean this workshop stood up. But you can see the building on the outside was completely destroyed.

[Thirty-two]

This is a picture of the Montgomery Ward building I referred to before, it belonged to the Baptist Church.

[Thirty-three]

This is a school building, public school building and you had one end of that public school building pretty well destroyed. And then the other end, pretty well intact.

[Thirty-four]

This is Law (?) Montgomery Ward's and again you can see that there used to be a store in between, right in here, but they cleaned it out. ...Oh, I'd say on about Tuesday, immediately after it happened on Monday. The engineers and contractors in Waco got together, a team of three. I'd worked up a check-off

and they went around and inspected every building that was damaged in Waco and completed these check-off sheets as to the status of the building. I used those condition reports to determine whether to turn the gas on or not. Well the council got excited about being sued, and we still lacked fifty buildings that had considerable amount of material in them. General Desusway said that he would keep the Army in there as long as there was enough debris inside the building to cover a body. And it, that didn't take too much debris.

[Thirty-five]

Thirty-five is another view storefronts.

[Thirty-six]

Thirty-six is a little more modern building, looks like pretty good brick and mortar; all of your show windows are out.

[Thirty-seven]

Another building and a car that was not completely caught in it.

[Thirty-eight]

Buildings that are destroyed; others that are standing, with those standing having the windows knocked out. ...all proved to be stronger than the single strength glass.

[Thirty-nine]

Here we had gotten the streets pretty well cleaned up. You'll have to remember that only two streets got---you got your in and out of downtown Waco, and it took some time to get the debris out of the streets.

[Forty]

A view just across an area. I don't know what was there.

[Forty-one]

Here's another building that was destroyed; the upper floor was destroyed, the wall, and you can see there was considerable amount of---I mean this wasn't just thin concrete, I mean brick wall, looks to me that it was a fairly thick brick wall. You take your concrete ...

[Forty-two]

This is the Montgomery Ward building again, see, you show a window area just completely demolished. [Minor: Yeah] But the upper part stood here, again you're getting, you probably have some lateral support built into the wall there.

[Forty-three]

Forty-three is just a little of the steeple they salvaged; very little they salvaged.

[Forty-four]

Another building that's completely racked, but this was a very weak building to start with.

[Forty-five]

More destruction. This shows destruction on the first floor and not as much on the second floor. ... and then you can see all your window panes knocked out on the second floor of that center building.

[Forty-six]

This is the Montgomery Ward building. [Minor: Yeah, we saw that before]
Yeah.

[Forty-seven]

These are some old, old buildings. I'd say these buildings are about 1885 vintage.

[Forty-eight]

Now here's a frame church that ex-- failed, or fractured pretty badly on the corner there, I mean it was a--but, as far as the timber structure, it stood up pretty well.

[Forty-nine]

Here's another wooden house that stood up.

[Fifty]

All right, now this is a well-constructed building there that--you see your reinforcement in that building, your parapets. They're built into the walls.

[Fifty-one]

All right, now this is one of the older buildings in Waco, but this is a very, very strong building. This building received/^{just}very little damage, but again--look at the strength in that building -- and look at your tie-across, I mean that's tied everywhere you could think of. [Minor: And that's masonry block, not ...] That's masonry, block masonry. [Minor: Yeah]
And that building--I'm sure it goes back into the 1890's. This is a disaster.

Minor: This is the end of the set of fifty-two slides. I'm going to ask Mr. Jones to tell us a little bit about what his position was in the city at the time of the tornado and what his role was in the days immediately after the tornado.

Minor: What was your title?

Jones: My title in Waco was City Engineer. The Mayor had at a meeting Monday--or Tuesday--morning with General Desusway, the Army commander of the ? area and some of the former councilmen, the city manager and myself met in the First National Bank in Waco. We had no civil defense organization. We had one Civil Defense director that went around carrying an empty briefcase full time. But the Mayor pointed to the City Manager and said, "You keep track of any offer of help in here." Pointed to a former City Councilman, and he said, "You keep track of any equipment that's offered." And he said that you will be--I will be in charge of all rescue work--digging the bodies out. So that was our organization.

Minor: You were in charge of rescue?

Jones: Right, I was in charge of all rescue.

Minor: So how did you organize that?

Jones: Well, when we first got started we had our, all of our replacements(?) from the military just ganged around the Dentist Building. And some civilians in there too.

Minor: Now, this is Tuesday morning?

Jones: Tuesday morning.

Minor: This tornado occurred Monday afternoon?

Jones: Monday afternoon, and Monday night and Tuesday morning we got ten inches of rain. And of course that amplified that sand, brick and lime mortar.

Minor: Well, now, there was people working over Monday night, but they were kind of ad-hoc.

Jones: Harum-scarum. They were running and they--the most important thing we set up, and the first thing was a cordoned (?) guard around the area. People were almost fighting to get in, to get downtown. But we had to keep people out. There was about two streets that led into the downtown area, and almost all the streets in the downtown area were cluttered with debris or blocked. But Monday night, that that they hauled off, they put all the rubble and the timbers into an area close to the water treatment plant there in Waco, and then tried to cover it, but it continued to catch on fire for a long time. It had never--it should never combine materials taken from such a disaster as this. Your timber and your rubble. Your spontaneous combustion is going to set off that timber and it's a fire you cannot put out. We had a fire in an old sanitary landfill that was created in World War I in Waco, it was out on the, it was off a new road. And every now and then that old sanitary landfill would catch on fire and it'd take millions of gallons of water to put out that fire. Now it had been there since 1918. So don't ever put--mix--materials. Put your lumber in one place and your rubble in another.

Minor: Well, how long did this rescue operation go on then, Tuesday, Wednesday ...

Jones: The rescue operation went on and the Mayor finally ordered the people could come back in the town Saturday morning. I got eight hours sleep from Monday morning to Friday.

Minor: When was the last person found alive?

Jones: That was about Wednesday, I believe. It, I believe the last one was--one came out of that Dentist Building. There's a man that said that he was in the stairwell--stairway--of the Amoco building right across the street from the Dentist Building, and he said that he was thrown from one side of the staircase to the other. That building had been racked so much that the elevator would not run on the rails.

Minor: Yeah, I've heard about that.

Jones: So... It was racked, I mean... but it stood there...

Minor: Was it reinforced concrete?

Jones: No, I think it was structural...

Minor: Structural steel.

Jones: Yeah, I think it was. But it was an old, old building. That building was very old. I'd say early 1900's. But we organized by getting the people that were standing on the shift getting ready to go to work, getting them about two blocks away from our major disaster, around the Dentist Building. That was where the most debris was blocking things off, was just in that area from about, I think it was about Fifth Street down to City Hall. But in... we kept these people off and

then would bring in a shift and take a shift away, and we tried to mix very little our civilian employees and our military employees. We had a colonel in charge of every shift and got good cooperation out of them--they weren't hard to deal with. Now we had people coming in that were--well, had one man to come in say that he was out of my office, out of the City Engineer's office, and he would inspect their building for so many dollars. And it took us a little while before we found him, but we put him in jail for the duration. He didn't work for me anymore! He wasn't from my office; he had no authorization to speak. The Salvation Army was completely broke and--Tuesday morning. The Red Cross finally wandered in there about Wednesday.

Minor: Well now I understood you set up the command post, those, away from downtown somewhere. Is that right?

Jones: Well, the command post was in the First National Bank Building.

Minor: Well, that's not far.

Jones: It was across to the Dentist Building. The telephone ran in about I think seven miles that we could call anywhere in the United States. Those lines were woven. I had people calling my house because they couldn't get in touch with me. The telephone company manager tried to call my house and he couldn't get the call through. See, I'd been call--asking for a private line as City Engineer, and they said they just couldn't give it to me, so after trying for about an hour to get my wife, he called next door and got my wife to come next door so he could tell her about--so she could tell him about some calls she had received there at home. See we had offers of equipment from

from as far off as St. Louis. People would bring in equipment, your grade-alls and an instrument like that with rubber tires-- those rubber tires didn't last too long, they were cut by (?) We completely used up the supplies that the city of Waco had, in trying to keep equipment rolling. Oil company (?) tank trucks in there with gasoline and you just drove up and they filled your car with gas, no questions asked.

Minor: Yup.

This is end of tape on Waco tornado.